Block, Mortimer

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ARTISTS - B

71.2009.085.02251

Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

Mortimer Block

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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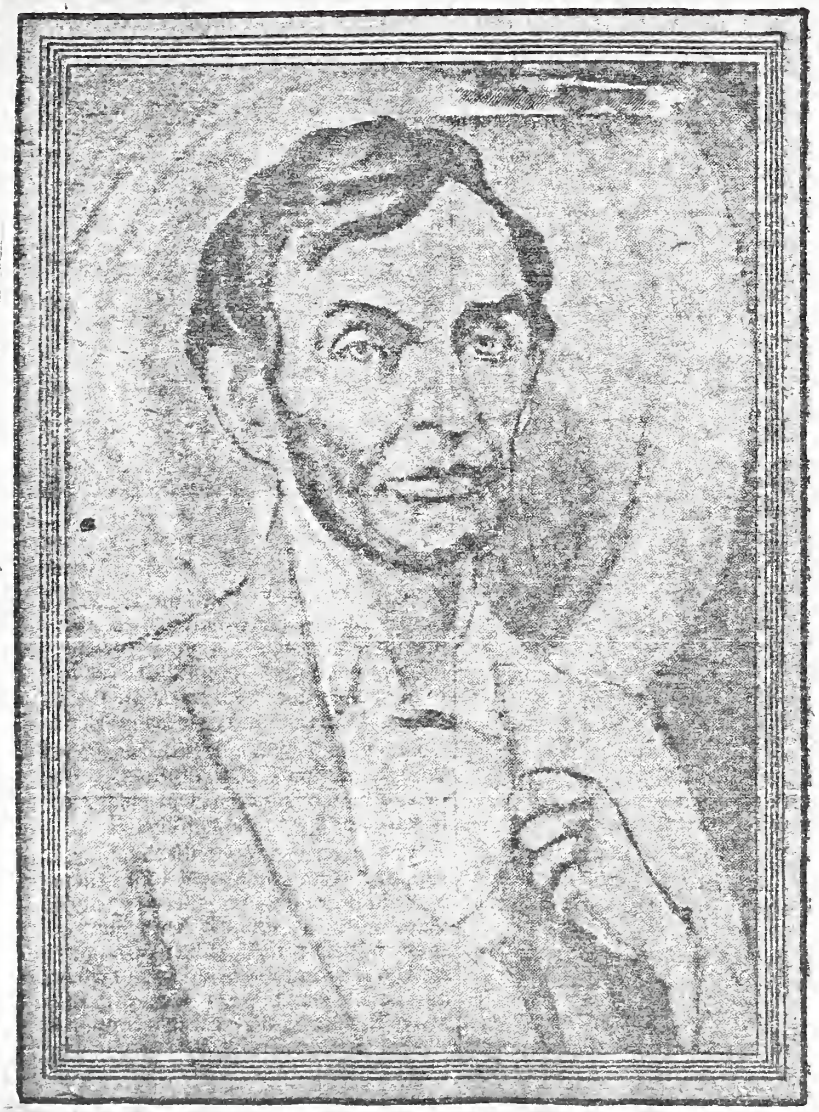
71. 2009. 085. 02251

Block, Mortimer

"Lincoln as a Saint," by Mortimer Block



By L. G. Bernheimer.

The World magazine. 2-12-1921

THIS portrait of Lincoln, by Mortimer Block, was exhibited recently at the Civic Club of New York City, with a number of other canvases by the same artist. It caused an extraordinary amount of comment, favorable and unfavorable, but none of the spectators remained unmoved. Some said that it is a putty Lincoln, a Lincoln emasculated, and were indignant at what they termed the degradation of a great man's likeness. Others declared that at last an artist has seized upon the essential characteristic of the Emancipator, that here the spirit of the dreamer, the tormented looker-within, absorbed in the drama of his own agony, has been captured for all time.

Whatever may be said of the portrait, it is admitted that the artist has expressed an original conception of Lincoln. The portraits we have of the great President are of a rugged sort. The strength of the man is emphasized, his face has been depicted as the type of power, and the struggles of his career have been engraved into his flesh. But here, the artist asserts, is the fundamental Lincoln, the seer, the spiritual man. Block has probed within, has interpreted Lincoln in terms of aspiration. In a word, he has sought, not for external likeness to the numerous photographs which he studied for two years, but for the spiritual essence of the man.

The portrait has an interesting history. For three years Block has gone threadbare for the sake of creating it, along with four other great conceptions. At a time when he did not have enough money to pay the rent of his studio he refused to paint smaller canvases for which there is an easy market, but devoted himself to these larger ones, for which he could hardly afford even canvas and pigments. And it is no pseudo-patriotism that has inspired his work, no muling sentiment of Americanism, for to Mortimer Block, Lincoln is, with Christ and Moses, one of the heroes of all history.

It is curious that a Russian Jew should be the artist to paint this portrait of Lincoln, that at a time when Russia is reviled and spat upon, when the world is flooded with anti-Semitic propaganda, a Russian Jew should devote three years of his life to an idealization of America's national hero.

But what is more curious still is the probability that this portrait will never find its place in America. In spite of the admiration it has aroused, in spite of the praise that has been flooded upon the artist, no art institution, no public body, no governmental agency has approached Block with an offer to place the portrait where it can be seen. At the present time it stands in the studio of Block with his four other mystic canvases: the Christ, the Moses, the Hebrew Scribe, and the Madonna.

Whatever may be said against the present-day Government of Russia, this cannot be said, that it neglects its artists. Had such a portrait been painted of a Russian hero it would not have remained hidden away out of the sight of men.

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